

# Apocalyptic Prophecies in the Qur'ān and in Seventh Century Extra Biblical Literature

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One of the most singular characters of 7<sup>th</sup> c. Middle Eastern literature is the pious king Alexander of Syriac apocalypses. In several texts, Alexander the Great is described as the mythical founder of the Byzantine Empire and as the recipient of prophecies concerning the sacred history of human salvation. The most ancient of these Syriac apocalypses is a prose work composed around 629 and entitled *Neṣḥānā d-leh d-Aleksandrōs*, “the victory of Alexander”. This text must have been quite widespread in the years immediately following its redaction. In fact, it was known and used as source by the authors of three Syriac apocryphal works composed during the 7<sup>th</sup> century: the metrical homely (*mēmra*) of Pseudo-Jacob of Sarug; the sermon on the end of the world of Pseudo-Ephrem; the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*.

As recent scholarship has convincingly demonstrated, the Syriac *Neṣḥānā* is also the text behind the narrative of *Dū 'l-Qarnayn* found at vv. 83-102 of *sūra al-Kahf*. In fact, the story told in this Qur'ānic pericope represents a re-telling of that concerning Alexander contained in the Syriac work. To my knowledge this is the only case of a Qur'ānic passage susceptible of being traced back to a specific source that is also contemporary to the period assumed for the life of the Qur'ān's prophet. This allows us to investigate how the Qur'ān receives the literary material found in a contemporary Syriac work and how it adapts it to its theological agenda. From this perspective, it is also interesting to observe how the Qur'ān's reception of the *Neṣḥānā* coincides or differs from the other 7<sup>th</sup> c. texts inspired by this same Syriac work.

As is known, the Syriac *Neṣḥānā* contains the oldest attestation of the episode about the wall built by Alexander against the impious nations of Gog and Magog. According to the text, once the erection of the wall is accomplished, Alexander engraves a prophecy over its gate. Under divine inspiration he predicts the future attacks of Gog and Magog and the events that would precede the end of times. As is

often the case in apocalyptic texts, the Alexander's prophecy told in the *Neṣḥānā* is a *vaticinium ex eventu*. While pretending to quote a prediction about the future emitted by Alexander in the ancient times, the author of the Syriac work is describing contemporaneous historical events. In fact, the *Neṣḥānā* is a highly propagandistic work composed to celebrate the victory of Heraclius over the Sasanians and to support his policy in the conquered territories. The author uses the motif of the Alexander's prophecy to express his own expectations about the future, that are based on the so-called Byzantine imperial eschatology. According to this concept of sacred history, the Byzantine Empire would establish a Christian cosmocratic kingdom before the end of times. In accordance with this creed, the Alexander of the *Neṣḥānā* predicts that the Graeco-Roman Empire will conquer the world during the eschatological era. The opening of the gate and the attack of Gog and Magog will mark the beginning of this historical process. According to the Syriac author, this period of the sacred history has already begun. In fact, in the *Neṣḥānā* Alexander predicts the eschatological attacks for the year 626. This date actually coincides with the beginning of the ruining invasions of the Middle East by nomad populations coming from Central Asia. In other words, according to the author of the *Neṣḥānā*, God has already ordered the opening of Alexander's gate and the people of Gog and Magog have already left their place of confinement. The author also expects the imminence of the Byzantine world conquest. From his perspective, Heraclius's victory over the Sasanians is only the first step toward the establishment of the Byzantine eschatological cosmocracy.

It has been observed that this representation of sacred history entails a remarkable alteration of the – so to speak – canonical Biblical eschatology. In fact, in the Book of Revelation (20:7-15) the attacks of Gog and Magog immediately precede the end of times and not the creation of a Christian cosmocratic empire. However, the eschatological model presented in the *Neṣḥānā* continued to be popular among the 7<sup>th</sup> c. Syriac authors. For instance, both Pseudo-Ephrem and Pseudo-Methodius used the motif of the Alexander's prophecy to predict the imminent Byzantine recovery over the Muslim conquerors and to predict the establishment of a Christian universal kingdom. A very different eschatological scenario is predicted in the metrical homily of Pseudo-Jacob of Sarug. According to the version of the Alexander's prophecy found in this homily, the opening of the eschatological gate not only is the prelude of the end of the world, but it also marks the imminent fall of the Byzantine Empire. As Reinink has shown, the homily of Pseudo-Jacob was composed in a Monophysite milieu as a reaction to the propagandistic pretensions of the *Neṣḥānā*. Around 635, this anonymous author composed a metrical version of the *Neṣḥānā* in which, however, he denied the imminent glorious future of the reign of

Heraclius. The reasons of the composition of such an anti-Byzantine work are to be found in the repressions of Monophysism operated by the Chalcedonian church in the years immediately following Heraclius' victory over the Sasanians.

Arriving now to the story of *Dū 'l-Qarnayn*, the Qur'ānic pericope evokes the main elements of the narrative told in the *Neṣḥānā*. As the Alexander of the Syriac text, *Dū 'l-Qarnayn* travels at the two edges of the world before reaching the place where he builds the barrier against Gog and Magog. Other specific details of the Qur'ānic story match precise correspondences with elements found in the Syriac work. Still more significantly, the common points between the two stories always appear in the same order. That the author of the Qur'ānic pericope specifically refers to the story found in the *Neṣḥānā* and not to another source is proved by several elements. For example, the Qur'ānic account reflects the editorial cuts that the author of the Syriac text clearly made on an older tradition concerning Alexander. In other words, the story of *Dū l-Qarnayn* leaves out the very same episodes that the author of the *Neṣḥānā* has omitted from his narrative. It is not even possible that the two texts reflect the editorial choices made by an earlier author, that is, that they share a common source. In fact, as Kevin van Bladel correctly observes, "the only way to posit a common source is to assume that everything held in common between the Qur'ānic account and the Syriac Alexander Legend could have been written for and would have made sense in an earlier context". However, this becomes impossible as the story of Alexander reported in both texts was composed with the specific purpose to serve as a pro-Byzantine propaganda in the historical milieu dated of 629–30.

The author of the Qur'ānic account does not simply retell the Alexander story told in the *Neṣḥānā*, but he also adapts it to his theological agenda. This clearly appears when considering the *Dhu-l-Qarnayn's* prophecy about the events following the collapse of the wall he built. Here, the opening of the eschatological gate immediately precedes the Day of Judgment and the punishment of the sinners. This eschatological scenario is consistent with the only other Qur'ānic reference to Gog and Magog. In fact, in Q 21:95-96 the attack of the impious people immediately precedes the resurrection of the dead. Thus, differently from Alexander's *vaticinium* in the *Neṣḥānā*, the prophecy found in the Qur'ān makes no reference to the establishment of any cosmocratic empire preceding the end of times. By contrast, the events predicted in the Qur'ān follow the canonical eschatology expressed in the Book of the Revelation. This situation is similar to the one observed in the homily of Pseudo-Jacob of Sarug. As Pseudo-Jacob, the author of the Qur'ānic pericope seems to have been conscious of the political implications expressed in the

*Neṣḥānā* and to have intentionally omitted the propagandistic scenario elaborated by the Syriac author. He also seems to have used the Alexander's prophecy found in the *Neṣḥānā* to express different expectations about the developments of sacred history.

In fact, as in the case of the quoted Syriac sources, the Qur'ānic pericope more likely refers to contemporary circumstances than to events still to take place. It is plausible that like every other 7<sup>th</sup> c. writer who reported the motif of Gog and Magog, the author of the Qur'ānic account also considered the attack of the impious people as already happened. It follows that the Day of Judgment, predicted by Dū l-Qarnayn for the time immediately following the eschatological attacks, was expected to take place in the present and not in the future. This would be consistent with the apocalyptic ideology that several scholars ascribe to early Islam. Dhu-l-Qarnayn's prophecy could have served as a confirmation of early Muslims' expectations about the imminent end of the world. One can also wonder if the narrative told in the Qur'ānic pericope was composed as an answer to the Byzantine imperial eschatology expressed in the *Neṣḥānā* or in other texts and sermons (as those by Pseudo-Ephrem and Pseudo-Methodius). Using the same prophecy referred to in these texts, the author of the Qur'ānic pericope denied that any interim event, as the establishment of a Christian cosmocracy, had still to occur before the imminent Day of Judgment.

Actually, there is another prophecy in which the Qur'ān directly addresses events concerning the Byzantine Empire. This second prophecy is found in the first verses of sūra al-Rūm (30:2-6). Here it is predicted that after being at first defeated, the Rūm will eventually obtain the victory over an unspecified enemy. This prophecy clearly describes the conflict between Byzantines and Sasanians, during which the former defeated the latter after a period of initial crisis. It is plausible that in this case too we are in presence of a *vaticinium ex eventu*. The prophecy about the destiny of the Rūm seems in fact a description *a posteriori* of events that already took place. A *terminus post quem* for this Qur'ānic passage could be fixed for the year 629, when Heraclius signed the peace treaty that put an end to the conflict with the Sasanians. In this case, the prophecy on the Rūm would be contemporary to that of Dhu-l-Qarnayn in al-Kahf. In fact, this pericope must have entered the Qur'ānic corpus after 629, when its source – the Syriac *Neṣḥānā* – was composed. Thus, the two prophecies would be roughly contemporary and refer to the same historical events.

It is important to observe that the prophecy concerning the Rūm finds a very precise parallel in a passage of the *History of Maurice* by Theophylact Simocatta, that

contains a prediction attributed to Khosrow II. Here, the Sasanian sovereign predicts that the Persians “will hold the Roman state in their power”. However, after a certain lapse of time, the “Romans will enslave the Persians”. Khosrow’s prophecy is clearly a description *a posteriori* of the wars between Byzantines and Sasanians, probably composed in the years immediately following the end of the conflict. In fact, Theophylact Simocatta wrote during the reign of Heraclius. What is interesting in this prophecy is the attribution of an eschatological dimension to the victory of the Graeco-Roman Empire. In fact, the *vaticinium* ends with the prediction that “When these very things have been accomplished, the day without evening will dwell among men and the expected fate will achieve power, when the transient things will be handed over to dissolution and the things of the better life hold sway”. Thus, according to Khosrow’s prophecy, the victory of the Byzantines over the Sasanians would be the very last event before the Last Day.

A similar eschatological view seems to be expressed at the end of the Qur’ānic prophecy about the Rūm. In particular, I refer to the claim at v. 4 that the believers will rejoice in the day of the Romans’ victory. This enigmatic statement is best explained if read as a prognostication about the coming of the Last Day, that would immediately follow the historical events referred to in the previous verses. Otherwise, it would be difficult to understand why the Qur’ān should express sympathetic feelings toward the Byzantines’ victory. This view seems to be corroborated by the claim at v. 4, “To God belongs the Command before and after”, and that at v. 5, “God helps whomsoever He will”, both suggesting that the victory of the Rūm follows God’s wish and is part of the divine project. That the Qur’ān here is not addressing secular but sacred history is also confirmed by the statement at v. 6, “this is the promise of God and God does not fail his promise”. Thus, it seems that the *vaticinium* found in al-Rūm predicts the same development of sacred history expressed in Khosrow’s prophecy: the defeat of the Romans is followed by their victory; this event immediately precedes the end of times. Such predictions would reflect larger apocalyptic expectations widespread in the Middle East in the third decade of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, in several sources of that period the conclusion of the wars between Byzantines and Sasanians is presented as the last event before the imminent end of the world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is to reply to these pessimistic feelings that according to Reinink the author of the *Neṣḥānā* composed his work about the imminent glorious future of the Greco-Roman Empire.

In conclusion, the two Qur'ānic prophecies analyzed in this paper address the same religious expectations, which are related to historical events occurring in the third decade of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Both passages find precise parallels in prophecies circulating among the Middle Eastern Christians at that very same time. As observed, the Qur'ān evokes these prophecies to express its own view about the developments of sacred history. Both prophecies refer to the same eschatological expectations about the closeness of the end of times. Furthermore, they seem to be related to contemporaneous beliefs about the imminent fall of the Byzantine Empire. Finally, as observed, it is likely that the two prophecies have been introduced in the Qur'ānic corpus roughly at the same time, and namely after 629. Of course, this reading presupposes a revision of the assumed notions about the period and the context in which the two passages were "revealed". In fact, the traditional view labels both passages as Meccan. However, in light of the arguments exposed above, one should consider the possibility that these verses were composed in a later date and perhaps in a political context different from that of the Arabian Peninsula.